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TERRORISM: AN AMERICAN LINK IN LIBYA

How two former CIA agents, turned mercenary, course in terrorism for Libyan strongman Muammar Khadafy. With tons of arms and explosives, a cadre of other Americans like themselves, the scheme that some of the participants believed a CIA-backed plot. Whoever the sponsors were, reveals a new breed of American soldiers offering their special skills to enemies of the United States.

By Stephen Kurkjian
and Ben Bradlee

As a Green Beret, he was accustomed to clandestine assignments in exotic places. But this was different.

Before, whether in Southeast Asia or the Dominican Republic, he'd always known that he was working for the United States. But now he was in Libya, an avowed enemy of the United States, working for its terrorist-prone military.

He had been in Tripoli less than a week when he was first taken to see the base of operations for the group he had joined. With another American at the wheel, they drove about twenty miles south of their luxury, seaside hotel until the sandy stretches of North African desert gave way to a lush orange grove. The car stopped at the end of the grove in front of the palace of Mohammed Idriss El Senussi, the former king of Libya, who had been ousted in 1969 in a bloodless coup mounted by Muammar Khadafy, the Libyan leader.

Behind a set of locked doors in the basement of the servants' quarters was located, in effect, a small American munitions factory, stocked with explosives shipped from the United States. There a group of Americans was busy camouflaging small bombs as lamps, candles, briefcases, and ashtrays.

The Green Beret, who less than ten days earlier had been going through routine army drills at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was now part of an ongoing operation which, from 1976 through at least 1979, is alleged to have provided terrorist training and explosives for the Libyan government.

At its simplest, this story tells how a growing band of mercenaries, many of them Americans, are selling their daring and special knowledge to the highest bidder — in this instance, the forces of international terrorism. But some of the Americans involved in the Libyan project — including the Green Beret who was given a leave of absence by his superiors to take part in the operation — are convinced that the US government knew full well what they were doing, and may have let the project continue longer than it should have, in hopes of infiltrating the international terrorist movement. Muammar Khadafy, after all, has openly financed such groups as the Palestine Liberation Organization, Italy's Red Brigades, the Irish Republican Army, the Japanese Red Army, Germany's Baader-Meinhoff gang, and others.

There is little doubt, though, that this project was a scheme hatched by two former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employees, Edwin P. Wilson and Francis E. Terpil, who used their expertise to design a program that supplied explosives and people to train terrorists in Libya.

First Americans recruited for the Libyan affair informed the CIA of the operation in September 1976, the agency notified the FBI. Yet the operation continued at least until late December 1979, according to a federal investigators' report, more than three years after the FBI investigation was begun.

Up to that point, officials now allege that the following had taken place:

- More than twenty Americans, including five former CIA employees, a Green Beret on leave, five ex-Green Berets, five former army explosives experts, and two civilian naval engineers were flown to Libya to perform a wide variety of support activities for Khadafy's military.

- Some of the Americans were put to work camouflaging terrorist bombs while others trained Libyan commandos in everything from bomb detonation to parachute jumping.

- Millions of dollars worth of military hardware, including twenty-five thousand pounds of explosives and a ground-to-air Redeye missile, were contracted for shipping to Libya without the required approval of the US